

# Common measuring instruments needed to assess the success of land reform in SA

By [Peter Setou](#)

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The negative perception among South Africans remains strong that the government is miles behind schedule in reaching its threshold of redistributing at least 30% of land into Black hands, almost 30 years into the democratic dispensation.



Peter Setou, chief executive of the Vumelana Advisory Fund

Industry analysts blame a lack of common measuring instruments and research methods for the inadequate data on how much land has been transferred to Black South Africans.

Between 2010 and 2017, the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform commissioned a land audit to provide information on private land ownership by race, nationality, and gender. While the information produced was a good starting point, it raised more questions than answers since the data had to be gathered from multiple sources and processed and analysed in different ways.

For example, at the time, the Deeds Office – the official repository of land rights in the country – did not register land rights by race. In addition, it did not compel landowners to apply for subdivision and land use change permits from the surveyor and municipal councils, respectively. The result was that there were surveyed land parcels that had changed land use but were still registered at the Deeds Office under their old land use classifications.

## Lack of common understanding

According to Wandile Sihlobo, chief economist of the Agricultural Business Chamber of South Africa (Agbiz), and Johann Kirsten, director of Stellenbosch University's Bureau for Economic Research, a lack of common understanding about the country's land and agriculture has unfairly fuelled the belief that 29 years after land reform, only 8-10% of the land that was previously exclusively owned by Whites has been redistributed.

To gauge whether the government is still unwavering in its resolve to reach its target, they researched various state institutions to verify statistics on land transferred to Black hands since democracy. They argue that critics of land reform have ignored the status of the land market. This includes the fact that some Black South Africans have been acquiring farmland on their own, and that the state has bought millions of hectares from the market for land reform purposes.

Furthermore, Sihlobo and Kirsten found that a sincere evaluation of all land reform programmes would result in at least 24% of farmland redistributed. "This is close to the 30% target which could be reached by 2030," they said.



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## Shared vision needed in advancing land reform

There are further reports, such as the AgriSA Land Audit of 2017, which present a somewhat different picture and perspective from the State Land Audit. These differences of opinion do not bode well for a shared vision and clearer objectives of where we are as a nation in advancing land reform.

It is concerning that some industry experts and other participants are still trying to answer the same questions six years after the audit, as well as ploughing through the many challenges experienced in preparing the Land Audit while trying to gather credible information for their argument.

Sadly, this indicates that the government has not implemented some of the recommendations of the Land Audit, six years later. These recommendations called for improving land information management policies through the establishment of an effective and efficient land administration system.

## No need to reinvent the wheel

Some lessons can be learnt from a report by the United Nations (UN) in a document entitled *Land Administration Guidelines*, published in 1996, advising Central European countries involved in establishing land administration systems after the breakup of the former Soviet bloc. This means that South Africa does not need to reinvent the wheel when it comes to measuring and recording land ownership and its use. Instead, it needs to transform its systems to be in line with international norms and standards.

The government can set and monitor technical standards, including field surveys, data processing, and data exchange according to international standards. Using the same measuring tools will make land classification and registration easier for the government, the private sector, and academia, among others.

The Land Audit was not done in vain because it has highlighted weaknesses in the country's systems, including land archive data that are needed in the long term for national interest land-related information. Due to a lack of reliable data archives, land claims processes are still unresolved to this day, despite the difficulties encountered nationally when land claims processes were initiated decades ago.



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## Achieving a more balanced perspective on progress

To maximise its potential for the benefit of dispossessed communities, it is unquestionably an important and expensive resource project that must be undertaken, improved, and managed efficiently. The process should, as far as possible, be inclusive and consider broader measures such as its value and potential, rather than land size in hectares alone. This will give a more balanced perspective on progress that has been made.

The case for common measuring instruments to help the country show who owns South African land and for what purpose will force commentators and analysts to use updated and reliable figures when criticising the government about land reform. This will also ensure that we have a common vision about what land reform should achieve, including how the results could be measured.

This will help government to set realistic goals and provide a better understanding of the gaps that remain in the land redistribution process. Furthermore, this will assist in tracking progress toward fulfilling section 25(5) of the Constitution's objectives of ensuring equal access to land based on an equitable basis.

## ABOUT PETER SETOU

Peter Setou is the chief executive of the Vumelana Advisory Fund, a non-profit organisation that works with land reform beneficiaries to make their land productive by facilitating partnerships between communities and investors who have, among other resources, access to capital and markets.

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